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ABSTRACT

This digest explores the life cycle of public libraries, presenting a "life stages" model and highlighting characteristics of each stage. It provides specific advice on what can be done in each stage to energize the library with "stage-appropriate" action. The characteristics that mark the Birth/Infant stage include: driving enthusiasm and effort of an individual or a few individuals; little or no cash support; very limited space; all volunteer effort; absence of structured supervision, management or control; and lack of formal government recognition, charter, or tax-exempt status. The Growth stage is marked by the following characteristics: a governing body of trustees or board members; a mission statement; charter and legal requirements of non-profit status; volunteer effort that is led by a volunteer coordinator or a paraprofessional; funding raised by special events and contributions; increased donations and some purchases of materials; some bibliographic control and implementation of a materials circulation system; relocation of library to larger low cost or donated space. The key features of the Maturity stage are the hiring of paid staff and sharing of resources with other libraries; with the right management, a mature library may be both efficient and effective through vigorous middle age and beyond, if it can change and adapt to changing community expectations. Characteristics in the Decline stage include the following: operations dominated by rules and routines, rather than customer service; unmotivated, burned-out staff; reduced public support and donations; election or appointment of "one issue" trustees; negative publicity; retirement or resignation of key staff; personnel problems; a library facility that is in disrepair; declining circulation, attendance and volunteerism; reduced hours or service. (AEF)

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Stimulating Growth and Renewal of Public Libraries

The Natural Life Cycle as Framework

By Norm Parry

Libraries have a natural life cycle: birth, growth, maturity, and decline. Each stage may be identified by its typical characteristics. Librarians who recognize and understand the library life cycle can benefit by anticipating and planning for change, diagnosing problems early, and having a framework for charting library development. Movement from one stage to the next may be directed and controlled by librarians using the life cycle model as a guide. Knowing what stage the library is in will help the librarian take appropriate action to stimulate growth, and re-energize and prolong the library's service life.

This ERIC Digest explores the life cycle of public libraries and highlights characteristics of each stage. The author provides specific advice on what can be done in each stage to energize the library with "stage-appropriate" action.

Libraries Live

A *growing* library, like an exuberant teenager, needs direction and a strong managerial hand. A *mature* library, in its golden middle age, may experience a period of restful self-satisfaction. Eventually, however, a library will decline and pass away if it no longer serves perceived essential community needs, depletes its resources, or fails to evolve to meet the challenges of its competitors.

Libraries are entropic. As living systems, they tend from order to disorder. Without a continuous infusion of new energy, any system will "run down" from organization to disorganization. Buildings wear out and collapse. Orderly shelves become, over time, less orderly. People naturally age. Libraries naturally age.

But libraries may be vitalized, energized and reorganized as they move from one life stage to the next. If they are renovated, restored or rededicated they can even repeat the life cycle. They can be reborn. An individual, or a small group of individuals, can bring a failing library back to life with an infusion of enthusiasm, capital and renewed purpose. Libraries can be directed and structured to adjust to change, where change is understood as natural. Like the librarians that attend them, libraries age and need care and special treatment at all stages of their lives. Knowing what stage a library is in--birth, growth, maturity, or decline--can be of considerable value in evaluating its condition and prescribing action to keep it vital and serving the needs of the community.

Typical Characteristics

Each stage of library development is marked by a set of characteristics *typical* of that stage. By knowing how libraries *normally* thrive and change, mature and decline, professionals and supporters may identify their library's current life-stage by recognizing the characteristics of that stage.

Effective management and response to "problems" may be informed by consideration of life stage and what is expected for that stage. What may be good practice for a young library may not be good for a mature library. What may be a "problem" in one stage may not be a problem in another. Knowing what to expect may allow librarians to exercise a kind of preventative library health management.

The following examples illustrate situations in which the characteristic features of a life stage were neglected: (1) A mature library has no policy manual; a patron challenges a book the library owns, but there is no procedure for response. (2) A library in growth stage has not yet applied for tax-exempt status; the state asks for the sales tax the library failed to pay. (3) A library in growth stage does not have a charter; a state grant is sought to expand, but the grant cannot be considered without a charter.

Readers may agree or disagree with the placement of characteristics for each stage, the number of stages and their significance. Other characteristics may be added to or subtracted from this schema. Indeed one goal of this article is to encourage discussion of what characteristics may be considered typical and where they might be placed in the life cycle outline. Longitudinal study and examination of written library histories could result in a useful evaluation instrument for library consultants and librarians.

Stages are measured in "maturity age," not "chronological age." A 60-year-old library may be in a growth stage, whereas a library barely five years old may be showing marked signs of decline. A library may demonstrate a mix of cross stage characteristics, making its assignment to any particular life stage more difficult. For example, a library may be in decline, but still retain a dedicated, enthusiastic staff. A library may have been in operation for many years without the development of a mission statement.

This "life stages" model was derived in part by examining both member libraries in a large upstate New York regional library system and historical accounts of libraries (such as Cary, Clearwater, and Jervis Public Libraries) available on the Internet and elsewhere. Further examination of libraries from the "life cycle" perspective may yield a valuable non-numerical measure of library performance. Measures such as the HAPLR rating system (Hennen, 2002), though useful, do not give librarians a sense of living purpose for their libraries. Quantitative analysis should not be the only significant measure of a library. The "life cycle" view treats libraries as vital, living things.

Using the Model

Using the life cycle framework, a plan for timely action can be developed. The most critical needs can be addressed first. The librarian using the life cycle model has an understandable, clear and explicit framework with which to work. Because the life cycle concept includes specific targets (characteristics) for each stage, goals and strategies can be developed to hit those targets. For example, a very young library (birth/infant stage) could choose the characteristics of the next stage (growth stage) as explicit goals to shoot for, which would drive the library along a natural and well-marked path to the next level. Similarly, a library in the mature stage that does not have a formal charter, mission statement and policy manual should plan to revisit these characteristics of the growth stage.

The life cycle framework can be used as a checklist of things to do as the library grows and develops. It can also be used to organize library history, mark important achievements for celebration and encourage long-range planning.

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The Stages

Birth/Infant

An individual or a few individuals conceive and create small public libraries. Their efforts and contagious enthusiasm engage others willing and able to sustain a library vision for the community. Obstacles are tenaciously overcome. Ways and means are improvised. Like all newborns, libraries need to be nurtured and given constant attention. The characteristics that mark this stage include: driving enthusiasm and effort of an individual or a few individuals; little or no cash support; very limited space; all volunteer effort; absence of structured supervision, management or control; and lack of formal government recognition, charter, or tax-exempt status.

To stimulate growth in this stage:

1. *Expand the base of supporters to establish stability and protection from loss of key people.*
2. *Form a fundraising committee to ask for donations of money and materials from local businesses and individuals.*
3. *Store books off-site and rotate them through the available space.*
4. *Appoint a coordinator of volunteers.*
5. *Visit other libraries to observe.*
6. *Establish and advertise regular hours.*
7. *Begin the process of formal organization by asking a few people to serve on a board of trustees, who will be responsible for taking the young library into the growth stage.*

Growth

Structure and organization are needed to accommodate growth in services, acquisitions and facilities management. As the value and complexity of the enterprise grow, responsibility for the protection and fair use of public property is assigned. Circulation grows rapidly as the library services become available to unserved and underserved members of the community. Other factors that move libraries into the growth stage are programs, media coverage and curiosity. This stage is marked by the following characteristics: a governing body of trustees or board members; a mission statement; charter and legal requirements of non-profit status; volunteer effort that is led by a volunteer coordinator or a paraprofessional; funding raised by special events and contributions; increased donations and some purchases of materials; some bibliographic control and implementation of a materials circulation system; relocation of library to larger low cost or donated space.

In this stage:

1. *Pick the busiest people you can find for your board. They will be dependable and dedicated, just as they are with the other organizations for which they serve.*
2. *Select a president, treasurer and secretary.*
3. *Write a mission statement.*
4. *Assign one person the responsibility of applying for a charter and satisfying other requirements of local, state and federal agencies.*
5. *Treat volunteers like royalty. They are the library's most valuable resource.*
6. *Send a thank you note when you receive a donation.*
7. *Visit a library in your area and get some advice on how to organize library materials. Keep it simple; keep it consistent.*
8. *Appoint an acting "library director."*
9. *Aggressively lobby for more space, a larger facility or an addition.*
10. *Promote the library through press releases and other publicity.*

Maturity

The key features of this stage are the hiring of paid staff and sharing of resources with other libraries. With the right management, a mature library may be both efficient and effective through vigorous middle age and beyond, if it can change and adapt to changing community expectations. Natural demand is satisfied. This is the stage of library development that is most likely to be sustainable, manageable and predictable. The characteristics of this stage may include: some or mostly, paid staff (including library professionals), with some volunteer involvement; membership in a library consortium or regional library system; traditional bibliographic control and circulation systems in place; sustainable public funding; steady or stable levels of circulation, visits and program attendance; shelf and storage space full; weeding is routine.

In this stage:

1. *Continue publicity. Keep the library visible in the community.*
2. *Stay in close contact with public officials and community leaders.*
3. *Apply for building or program grants.*
4. *Survey library user needs and opinions.*
5. *Continue maintenance and repair.*
6. *Plan for expected major expenditures such as replacing the roof.*
7. *Follow and revise long range plans.*

Decline

A library in decline may have outlived its usefulness to the community. Without an infusion of new dedication and enthusiasm (the hallmark of the *birth/infant* stage) it may pass on, quietly or in a shout of (belated) neighborhood protest. If a library no longer serves its charter, mission or purpose, it is a prime target for budget cuts, downsizing and consolidation. Characteristics in this stage include the following: operations dominated by rules and routines, rather than customer service; unmotivated, burned-out staff; reduced public support and donations; election or appointment of "one issue" trustees; negative publicity; retirement or resignation of key staff; personnel problems; a library facility that is in disrepair; declining circulation, attendance and volunteerism; reduced hours or service.

In this stage:

1. *Review rules, polices and procedures. Update or eliminate inefficient or ineffective practices.*
2. *Send staff to seminars, workshops and professional development classes.*
3. *Demonstrate the value of library services to the community.*
4. *Appoint trustees and staff eager to reenergize the library.*
5. *Renovate and redecorate building.*
6. *Make customer service your primary focus.*

Libraries in Nature

Your library is bound to live out its natural life, decline and turn to dust, unless those responsible for supporting and managing it intervene with new resources and new enthusiasm at the appropriate stages of development. In its wild natural state, the library is subject to the same forces that erode everything valuable: apathy, neglect and entropy. The librarian who sees the library as a vital, natural entity rather than a bricks and mortar institution, will be prepared to take action to reverse, or at least retard library aging and decline.

Executive Director of the New York Library Association, Susan Keitel, suggests that libraries "deserve to be nurtured …but libraries cannot live on love alone" (Keitel, 2003). She is right. Viewed as living entities, libraries behave like the people who manage and support them. To thrive they need care and love. But young or old, libraries need the sustained attention, fiscal support and life giving energies we all need and deserve.

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